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Setting up a dementia café

- Find out what is available locally
- Consult people with dementia
- Decide on a name
- Recruit volunteers
- Work in partnership
- Offer friendship and information

Background

The 'Alzheimer Café', as pioneered in the Netherlands in the 1960s, is a simple but effective way to offer friendship, 'peer support' and information. A key principle is that the person with dementia attends with a friend or family carer, and support is offered to both. Church-based cafés in the UK have their own distinctive character, reflecting the local area and the skills of everyone involved. They work best when part of the landscape of support in the locality, linked with other groups, organisations and professionals supporting people living with dementia and their carers.

1 Find out what help is already available in your area for people living with dementia

Before you set up a café, research what support is already provided in your local area. Are there cafés already in existence? If there are ample groups, you might consider other ways to help. If it is agreed that a new café is needed, finding out about other local support will enable you to signpost them to guests.

2 Talk to people living with dementia and their carers about what they need

The best people to talk to are those whose lives are affected by dementia. Do involve them in conversations about plans for a dementia café. You could do this through conversations in person, on the

phone, or by hosting an informal meeting to act as a 'focus group'. This will guide you in setting up the group but will also help you make the case to your church that a group is needed.

3 Decide on a name and how to publicise the group

The name you choose will tell local people something about the group. Some churches use the title 'Dementia Café', but others opt for a less direct name, such as 'Forget Me Nots' or 'Memory Café', which might broaden participation and overcomes the obstacle that some people living with dementia resist attending activities with 'dementia' in the title.

4 Recruit volunteers to help run sessions

It helps to have a team of volunteers, with a rota and specific tasks allocated. Make sure interacting with individual guests is included in task allocation so you can give each person who comes a personal welcome. If volunteers are able to engage the person living with dementia in conversation, then carers are better able to talk with one another and any professionals attending the sessions from whom they may seek help and advice.

Volunteers can be drawn from the wider community, not just the church congregation, and former carers of people with dementia are often willing to help. Check with your church safeguarding officer on safe recruitment of volunteers – such as any DBS checking and safeguarding training that is needed and whether references are required. Arrange dementia awareness training for the team so they feel comfortable and confident in their roles and interacting with guests.

5 Work in partnership with dementia care organisations and professionals

Local dementia specialists will be a source of guidance in setting up the group, helping risk assess your premises and suggesting activities to include in sessions. If they have been involved in the setting up of the group, they are more likely to encourage people living with dementia to attend the sessions. The role of the Anna Chaplain and others from church is to offer hospitality and a sense of connection, but specific needs as dementia develops may necessitate professional help. Invite health and social care professionals to pop into sessions so that they can pick up on unmet needs and arrange for help to be provided. Have a display of leaflets and keep them up-to-date.

6 Offer a distinctive group that combines social benefits and useful information and remember 'small is beautiful'

Think creatively in your team about how your café might offer something new and different that is appealing. Are there gifted musicians able to lead a singing session, or others with craft skills or local history knowledge? Do you have links into other community organisations? Don't be discouraged if numbers are low. It is beneficial for people living with dementia to socialise in small groups – the noise and bustle of crowds can feel overwhelming. The group will change constantly, as people with dementia move to care homes or die, so be prepared for flux and the need for regular publicity. Think through how you support bereaved carers; it can take time to recover from the loss of the cared-for person and from the deep-seated physical impact and emotional stress of caring. Life can feel empty when the regular routines of care-giving are gone.

Further resources:

Memory Café: How to engage with memory loss and build community, by Steven Morris (Grove Books, 2017), available online at grovebooks.co.uk for £3.95

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